

Metrics for evaluating dialogue strategies in a spoken language system

Morena Danieli and Elisabetta Gerbino

CSELT - Centro Studi e Laboratori Telecomunicazioni

Via G. Reiss Romoli 274 - 10148 Torino, Italy

E-Mail: danieli and gerbino@cselt.stet.it

Abstract

In this paper, we describe a set of metrics for the evaluation of different dialogue management strategies in an implemented real-time spoken language system. The set of metrics we propose tries to offer useful insights in evaluating how particular choices in the dialogue management can affect the overall quality of the man-machine dialogue. The evaluation makes use of established metrics: the transaction success, the contextual appropriateness of system answers, the calculation of normal and correction turns in a dialogue. We also define a new metric, the implicit recovery, which allows to measure the ability of a dialogue manager to deal with errors by different levels of analysis. We report evaluation data from several experiments, and we compare two different approaches to dialogue repair strategies using the set of metrics we argue for.

Introduction

A dialogue module which is part of a complex natural language system (for example, of a speech understanding system providing information) may be evaluated according to different viewpoints, the more important of which are:

- (1) its ability to drive the user to find the required information;
- (2) the overall quality of the dialogic interaction;
- (3) its capacity to maintain an acceptable level of interaction with the user, also when other modules have partial or total breakdowns.

The first point may be measured in terms of the success of the dialogic transaction, but the second and the third points are rather matters of subjective evaluation. This dichotomy is reflected in the state of the art of dialogue evaluation methods. While there is a set of objective metrics which can be used to measure the performance of a dialogue system (Hirschman et al. 1990), only in the last few years an effort has been done to define metrics which express the subjective evaluation of dialogue systems.

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By taking into account the shortcomings of the recent work done on subjective evaluation (Simpson & Fraser 1993), (Hirschman & Pao 1993), this paper has the goal of arguing for a set of metrics which can be fruitfully used to compare the behaviour of different dialogue strategies within speech systems. In particular, we introduce a new metric (implicit recovery) which captures the ability of the dialogue manager to recover from partial or total failure of previous levels of analysis. Other metrics we used (i.e. contextual appropriateness, turn correction ratio, transaction success) derive from the set of evaluation metrics defined within the Sundial Esprit project (Danieli et al. 1992): in what follows they are discussed only to point out possible difference in their interpretation.

We will show the application of these metrics to evaluate data coming from two trials carried out on the spoken man-machine dialogue system developed at CSELT for the Italian language. The application domain of the system is the Italian railway time-table; the system allows to access a remote database using the telephone and to get information about the train times and services. During the experimentation two different approaches to dialogue management were tested and evaluated. This methodology of evaluation allows to compare the different effects of the two approaches on the system behaviour.

Metrics and Methods of Evaluation

Implicit Recovery

In evaluating a dialogue strategy for a spoken language system, attention should be paid to capture its capacity to deal with situations in which errors occur. In particular, we expect that a well conceived dialogue system should be able to repair from both partial and total failure by the previous levels of analysis. That feature may be considered according to different points of view: on one hand the dialogue manager should be able to filter the parser output and to interpret it starting from contextual knowledge. On the other hand, it should embody explicit strategies to recover from understanding or recognition errors. While the latter ability may be evaluated in terms of the number of correction turns

undertaken by system and user (see below), we define the *implicit recovery* (IR) as a measure of the former ability.

The IR is the measure of the dialogue module capacity to regain utterances which are partially failed at recognition or understanding levels. When the linguistic processor performs a robust partial parsing, the dialogue module may receive either a correctly representation of the utterance conceptual content, or only partial results. Of course, in spite of robustness of the parser, complete failure in understandings may also occur. Utterances which have been partially misunderstood may have insertions of concepts which are not present in the original utterance, deletions of some concepts or substitutions of the value of a concept with another one. The dialogue module should be able to deal with this kind of errors by interpreting them within the dialogue context.

In order to measure the IR, we need a semantic representation formalism that allows to calculate the percentage of correctly understood concepts. In evaluating the experimental data (see the fourth paragraph), we used the conceptual accuracy metric (ConA) at the syntactico-semantic level.¹

To apply the IR metric, an expert examines the dialogue logfiles and for each user's utterance, he checks if the semantic representation of the utterance meaning given by the parser is correct or not. No IR occurs if the utterance has been correctly understood or completely failed. Otherwise the expert sees if the error has been recovered, i.e. an appropriate answer is given by the system.² This case is marked to be an IR. The IR final result is the percentage between the number of cases where the dialogue manager was able to correct the conceptual errors and the number of sentences which presents conceptual errors.

U1: I want to go from Roma to Milano in the morning.
 <arrival-city=MILANO, departure-time=MORNING>
S1: Sorry, where do you want to leave from?
U2: From Roma.
 <departure-city=ROMA, cost-of-ticket?>
S2: Do you want to go from Roma to Milano leaving
 in the morning?

Figure 1: Example of Implicit Recovery

Figure 1 shows an example of dialogue interaction where two IR occur. In the first dialogue turn, the user's utterance contains all the concepts the system needs to retrieve the desired information, but the recog-

¹This is a metric which uses at the understanding level the word accuracy formula, expressed in terms of insertion, deletion and substitution of concepts, as in (Baggia et al. 1994)

²For the definition of contextual appropriateness see the next paragraph.

nition (or parsing) level fails to represent the departure city. The dialogue takes into account the correctly understood concepts and asks for the concept which was lost. In the second turn, the recognition level inserted some words in the best decoded sequence that the parser interprets as a request of the cost of ticket. But since for the dialogue strategy that concept is not relevant in the current context, the system does not consider it and asks the user to confirm only the correct concepts it has been able to collect. In similar cases we would say that the IR percentage is 100%.

Other Metrics

The contextual appropriateness is a measure of the degree of contextual coherence of the system answers. The concept of *contextual appropriateness* (CA) is taken from the Grice's conversational maxims (Grice 1967) and it has been used within the Sundial project to evaluate the appropriateness of system utterances in their dialogue context. We have restricted the definition of contextual appropriateness proposed in (Simpson & Fraser 1993) to obtain a three-valued measure: appropriate, inappropriate and ambiguous.

According to this restricted interpretation, we say that a system utterance is appropriate (AP) when it provides the user with the information he required, when it asks him to give additional constraints which are essential to interpret his request or when it introduces (or continues) a repair strategy. A system utterance is inappropriate (IA) when it supplies the user with wrong information or when it fails to interpret the speaker's utterance in the correct context. Finally, a system utterance is ambiguous (AM) when it violates the Gricean maxims of quantity and manner, i.e. it is over (or under) informative, it is obscure and it is not orderly and brief.

During the implementation of the dialogue systems we saw that it was useful to measure the ratio of those turns which are concerned with anomalous behaviour from both the user and the system to all turns in a dialogue; we named this measure *turn correction ratio* (TCR). The TCR is calculated adding the results of the application of two submetrics: the turn correction by the system (STC) and the turn correction by the user (UTC). The STC concerned those dialogue turns where the system introduces a recovery strategy and tells the user to repeat or rephrase his sentence. The UTC occurs when the user detects or corrects an error, repeats or rephrases an utterance.

All the turns which are neither STC nor UTC are considered normal turns: by following the classification proposed in (Hirschman & Pao 1993), we consider normal turns of the system the appropriate directives, such as the introductory message, the appropriate diagnostic messages and the correct answers. The normal turns of the user are the utterances used to request information (both first and continuation utterances), and the answers to appropriate system directives.

Finally, we used the concept of *transaction success*

(TS) to measure the success of the system in providing the speakers with the information they required, when such information is available in its database.

Methodology

The system configuration permitted to store all the data collected in the tests: the speech material, the semantic representation of the sentences (parser output), the dialogue logfile (user/system interactions) and some timing (recognition time, parser time and dialogue time). All the speech material had to be manually transcribed; the dialogue corpus evaluation was performed by two experts on the dialogue logfiles as in (Goodine et al. 1992).

Subjects' global impressions were collected by asking subjects to complete a questionnaire. Comments on questionnaire are in (Ciaramella 1993).

Description of the Experimental Set-up

Two different trials were carried out along three months on an integrated spoken man-machine dialogue system which allows the access to a remote DB using the telephone. This prototype was partially developed under the Sundial Esprit Project. The application domain consists of the Italian train time-table information. The first trial was carried out in March 1993 and the second one in May 1993. For the first trial, twenty subjects were recruited among people who have never used a computerized telephone service before. Those subjects were paid for testing the system; ten out of them were female and ten were male; the average age of the subjects was 37.

For the second trial, fifteen people were recruited among CSELT staff: eleven out of them were male, four were female. The average age of the male subjects was 35, that of the female subjects was 30.

The subjects came to CSELT laboratories and received a single page of printed directions which contained a brief explanation of the service capabilities and some instructions (e.g.: "Please, speak after the tone"). All the subjects carried out the test being alone in an isolated room. During the dialogue with the system they had to get information about train time-table and related services (sleeping-cars, restaurant, rates and extra-fares, reservation and so on).

To precisely determine if the task has been solved, predefined pictorial scenarios were used. Each scenario specified the departure and arrival city names, chosen among the set of 100 cities of the railway DB in use, and the train attributes to be collected during the dialogue, while the user was free to specify the departure time.

In both trials each subject had to play at least 4 scenarios; the corpus of dialogues collected in the tests are shown in Table 1. For each trial, the total number of dialogues, the number of continuous speech utterances, and the average number of words per utterance are reported.

Trial	No. of Subj.	No. of Dial.	No. of Utt.	Avg. words per Utt.
1st	20	85	678	4.8
2nd	15	63	464	4.2

Table 1: Dialogues corpus characteristics

Overview of the System Architecture

The system is composed by the following modules: the acoustical front-end (AFE), the linguistic processor (LP), the dialogue manager and message generator (DM), and the text-to-speech synthesizer. The acoustical front-end and the synthesizer are interconnected to the PBX through a telephone interface, while the dialogue manager is connected to a Computer Information System to obtain the information on Italian train time-tables. The system is nearly real time. For a complete description of the system see (Clementino & Fissore 1993).

The AFE performs feature extraction and acoustic-phonetic decoding; both DDHMM and CDHMM are supported and the vocabulary size is about 800 words (Fissore, Laface, and Micca 1991). In these experiments we used a preliminary version of the recognition module which used always DDHMM with Forward decoding algorithm and made no use of linguistic models.

The LP starts from the AFE output, best-decoded sequence, and performs a multi-step robust partial parsing. In this strategy, partial solutions are accepted according to the linguistic knowledge (Baggia & Rullent 1993). At the end of the parsing stage a deep semantic representation for the user utterance is sent to the DM.

The DM models the user-system interaction and contextually interprets sentences using a prediction mechanism (Germino & Danieli 1993). The DM also implements many recovery strategies in order to allow completion of the task, even in case of lower level errors. Finally, it generates the answer sent to the text-to-speech synthesizer, which contains specific prosodic rules oriented to the dialogue (Quazza et al. 1993).

During the trials, two different versions of the DM (D1 and D2) were tested by all subjects; each carried out two telephone calls with one version and two calls with the other one.

The D1 version was totally developed at CSELT and it is currently used in the integrated system. The D2 version was developed under the Sundial Esprit Project.

Figure 2 shows an example of dialogue interaction carried out with the D1 version, while Figure 3 shows an example of dialogue interaction carried out with the D2 version. As we can observe from the dialogue examples, the more salient differences between the two DM versions concerned the kind of information supplied and the repair strategies.

The D1 version provides the opportunity to ask information about train times and services, but it does not leave the user free to make requests about more

S1: Hello, This is Train Enquiry Service. Please speak after the tone. Which information do you need?
U1: I want to go from Torino to Milano.
 <departure-city=TRENTO, arrival-city=MILANO>
S2: Do you want to go from Trento to Milano? Yes or No?
U2: No.
 <confirmation=NO>
S3: Do you want to leave from Trento? Yes or No?
U3: No.
 <confirmation=NO>
S4: Where do you want to leave from?
U4: I want to leave from Torino.
 <departure-city=TORINO>
S5: Do you want to leave from Torino? Yes or No?
U5: Yes.
 <confirmation=YES>
S6: Do you want to go to Milano? Yes or No?
U6: Yes.
 <confirmation=YES>
S7: At which time do you want to leave?
U7: I want to travel in the evening.
 <departure-time=EVENING>
S8: Do you want to leave between 6 and 9 p.m.? Yes or No?
U8: Yes.
 <confirmation=YES>
S9: There is a train from Torino Porta Nuova to Milano Centrale. It leaves at 7.10 p.m. and arrives at 8.55 p.m.. Do you want more detailed information about it?
U9: Is that an intercity train and how much does the ticket cost?

Figure 2: Example of D1 dialogue interaction

than one train route in a single telephone call. On the contrary, the D2 version allows the request of information about many train routes in a single telephone call, but it does not provide the caller with information about the train services. Moreover the D1 confirmation and repair strategies are specifically implemented to deal with possible speech errors. Actually the D1 (see Fig. 2) implements an explicit concept confirmation strategy forcing the user to answer with isolated words (yes or no); this strategy is robust and safe even if it increases the number of turns spent in confirmations and consequently the dialogue time. Besides, the D1 strategy makes use of more robust speech interaction modalities such as isolated word and spelling.

The D2 system implements discourse strategies which are more confident in the capabilities of the acoustic and linguistic processors. Actually, D2 is able to support three confirmation strategies: confirmation alone for a bunch of concepts; confirmation for a bunch of concepts plus initiative; confirmation concept by concept, and then initiative. However the dialogue manager is not able to switch autonomously from one strategy to another when it detects troubles with the communica-

S1: Hello, This is Train Enquiry Service. Please speak after the tone. Which information do you need?
U1: I want to travel from Milano to Roma.
 <departure-city=MERANO, arrival-city=ROMA>
S2: At which time do you want to leave from Merano to Roma?
U2: No, I want to leave from Milano in the evening.
 <confirmation=NO, departure-city=MILANO, departure-time=EVENING>
S3: Do you want to leave from Milano between 6 and 11 p.m.? Please answer Yes or No?
U3: Yes.
 <confirmation=YES>
S4: Intercity 243 leaves from Milano Centrale at 20 past 8 p.m.; it arrives at Roma Termini 6 o'clock a.m.. Do you want another train information?
U4: No
 <confirmation=NO>
S5: Good bye.

Figure 3: Example of D2 dialogue interaction

tion. When an error occurs, D2 decides to enter a special mode: after three requests for repetition, the last one using the spelling modality, the system advises the user to contact a human operator.

An example of D2 multiple confirmation plus initiative strategy is shown in Figure 3. There the U1 utterance is misunderstood at the recognition level. The dialogue module implicitly asks for confirmation of departure and arrival cities by asking for the desired departure time (see S2). In U2 the subject denies the departure city proposed by the system, reconfirms that he wants to leave from Milano and gives the system the departure time. System utterance S3 shows that D2 considers the arrival city as implicitly confirmed and carries on the interaction by focusing on the new acquired concepts. During the testing of this system we chose to run it with a confirmation strategy which did not forced the subjects to have recourse to isolated word recognition.

Evaluation Results

The dialogue corpus collected in the trials was analysed according to the whole set of evaluation metrics. At the recognition and understanding levels, users' utterances were evaluated by considering the standard measurements: respectively, the Word Accuracy (WA) calculated on the best decoded sequence against the transcribed uttered sentence, and the Sentence Understanding (SU). In the first trial the results were: 52.1% of WA and 50.9% of SU. In the second trial the results were: 60.2% of WA and 59.1% of SU.³ As regards these data, we did not distinguish between the two different

³Recent recognition results are available in (Giachin 1995). Now the system obtains 82.6% of WA by using linguistic models at the recognition level.

DM versions because they are related to the two common system modules (AFE and LP).

As regards the dialogue level, we calculated contextual appropriateness (CA), explicit recovery (ER) and implicit recovery (IR). Moreover we distinguished between the two DM versions, in order to study the capability of these metrics to point out the differences between various dialogue strategies. Table 2 shows the results obtained in the trials for the contextual appropriateness. The first column reports the percentage of the appropriate sentences uttered by the system; the second column reports the percentage of the inappropriate sentences and the third column shows the percentage of ambiguous utterances. As we can see, both the dialogue systems are seldom ambiguous; that say us that the generation modules of both the systems are good.

Trial	CA		
	AP	IA	AM
1st D1	77.6%	20.6%	1.8%
1st D2	49.2%	50.3%	0.5%
2nd D1	79.1%	19.3%	1.6%
2nd D2	56.5%	43.5%	0.0%

Table 2: Contextual Appropriateness Results

We deem that the contextual appropriateness metric is useful to evaluate the quality of the dialogic interaction and to address the issue of co-operation in human computer dialogue. We can expect that in a ideally perfect speech system, where no recognition and understanding errors occur, the CA should measure properly the DM capability to correctly interpret user's utterances. Starting from the same percentage of correctly understood utterances (respectively 50.9% and 59.1% in the two trials), D1 and D2 get very different CA scores. In particular, AP results reflect the greater robustness of the D1 version when it faces off difficulties at the recognition or understanding level.

Another data which stands out is the growth of the percentage of AP when the users are good conversationalists with the computer, as the subjects participating to the second trial were. The value of AP increases more for the D2 dialogue system: that means that the dialogue strategies it implements are more sensitive to the performances of the previous levels of analysis.

Trial	ER		IR
	UTC	STC	
1st D1	24.8%	31.8%	17.0%
1st D2	67.9%	65.6%	10.8%
2nd D1	25.6%	22.5%	17.0%
2nd D2	45.0%	49.2%	10.7%

Table 3: Recovery Results

Table 3 shows the results obtained in the trials for the metrics which measure the recoveries from errors implemented both by the systems and by the subjects. If we consider the ER data, we can read in the first column the percentage of correction turns done by the users (UTC), while the percentage of correction turns by the systems (STC) is reported in the second column. The experiments highlight that if a dialogue strategy is not robust enough to deal with errors by the lower levels (see D2 data), the number of turns spent by both user and system in repairing from errors grows up. When users are more co-operative, as staff subjects were, the percentage of STC and UTC decreases.

The third column of Table 3 reports the percentage of turns in which the dialogue systems implicitly recovered from errors by recognition and understanding. Those data show that the capacity of implicit recovery of D1 and D2 does not vary from naive to expert users: actually, IR is a measure of a dialogue system ability and it does not depend upon the degree of users' co-operation. Since D1 and D2 make use of different degrees of predictive contextual knowledge, we expected a difference in their IR performance and that is shown by the data. The different performance is also due to the fact that D1 applies its predictive knowledge in more and more focused interpretation contexts as far as the dialogue goes on. For example, the recourse to the request for a single concept, see Figure 2 turns S4 and S7, allows using focused predictive knowledge.

On the contrary, the interpretative focus of D2 is always wider, so that it cannot exploit the advantages of very constrained contextual interpretation, which seems to be useful in this kind of application of discourse analysis. Let us consider the use of implicit confirmation strategy showed in Figure 3, turn S2. There the reply to system enquiry by the subject may contain a great deal of information, for instance the negation of what the system said along with the introduction of new concepts (see turn U2). In this case, the use of very constrained predictive knowledge is hardly possible.

Table 4 shows the whole system performance: the percentage of TS, the average number of turns per dialogue, the average dialogue time, and the TCR.

Trial	TS	Avg. No. of Turns	Avg. Dial. Time	TCR
1st D1	77.6%	20	5'15"	10.0%
1st D2	51.0%	11	3'20"	27.0%
2nd D1	96.6%	21	5'09"	9.5%
2nd D2	83.3%	11	2'59"	15.0%

Table 4: Whole System Performances

The TS is always good, but it increases as the users are more friendly or as much as the acoustic and linguistic processors have better performance.

Finally, we notice that the number of turns and the dialogue time are higher with D1: this difference is due

to the fact that D1 allows the request of many information about train services and it does not close the interaction if there are difficulties in recognition or understanding.

Conclusions

The results of these experiments are encouraging as regards the effectiveness of the metrics we used. We have argued that it is important to capture the ability of a dialogue system to reduce the consequences of recognition and understanding errors.

The necessity of many specific metrics is due to the fact that various dialogue strategy aspects have to be evaluated. Actually, at least three aspects have to be measured: the dialogue system ability to drive the user to find the desired information is captured by measuring the transaction success along with the average number of turns in the dialogue, while the quality of the man-machine interaction is measured by the metric of contextual appropriateness. Finally, the dialogue system robustness is evaluated by measuring its ability to perform both implicit and explicit recoveries when the lower levels of the system fail. This set of metrics also enables the dialogue system designer to verify the success of alternative strategies. According to us, in this field another important research topic should be the definition of methods for evaluating the system effectiveness and friendliness from the user's point of view.

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